

CAVALCADE
OF COUNTIES:

THE HANDSOME HILLS



Staff photos by Johnston, Porter, Dorer.

The view from Washington Rock, a summit in the Watchung Range, which served as an observation post for Gen. George Washington.

Estates and Farms Characterize Somerset, One of Jersey's Fastest-Growing Industrial Counties

BY JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

MUCH of New Jersey's geographical diversity comes together in Somerset County, where North Jersey's rolling hills level off into South Jersey's flatlands; where gently flowing streams swell into the Raritan, "Queen of Rivers," and where widely varied soils tempt the farmer.

This pleasant land has ever attracted the wealthy; for more than 200 years the "Somerset Hills" have meant landed gentry, riding to the hounds and lavish living. The fertile valleys along the rivers have meant prosperity for less well-heeled farmers, too. Finally, transportation men through the years have made Somerset County the North Jersey hub where highways and railroads meet.

Thus, destined to be a North Jersey crossroads and a region of expansive living, it seems strange that the English families who stopped briefly along the Millstone River in 1642 didn't tarry longer before shoving on for Philadelphia. For that matter, though, few paid much attention when a Dutch traveler visited the Raritan Valley in 1650 and called it "the handsomest and pleasantest country that man can behold."

Land sales in 1681 marked the beginning of settlement, with Thomas

Codrington and John Royce taking up large tracts in the vicinity of what is now Bound Brook. Many followed, particularly French Huguenots and Dutch farmers from Long Island. Generally the Dutch stayed in the lowlands while the English and Scotch favored the hill country.

THE Provincial Assembly split Somerset County away from Middlesex on May 14, 1688, because "the uppermost part of the Raritan River is settled by persons, whom, in their husbandry and manuring their lands, are forced upon quite different ways and methods from other farmers and inhabitants of Middlesex County * * *"

Unique though their husbandry and manuring might have been, the residents of Somerset County were not numerous because they remained under the jurisdiction of Middlesex County courts until 1713, when Somerset finally received permission to build its first court house at Six Mile Run (now Franklin Park).

Population then centered near New Brunswick, where a group of Dutch farmers had settled down to farm and to raise large Dutch families. Villages came into being along the Raritan River and its tributaries and in the

hills near Basking Ridge. The population was heterogeneous, both in nationality and rank—English and Scottish gentlemen and yeomen, Dutch burghers and peasants, German masters and redemptioners, French Huguenots of varied fortune. One historian has pointed out that just because Dutch names abound in Somerset, the Lowlanders didn't do all the settling—they merely had the biggest families.

No brood better illustrates that than the family of Christian Van Doren and his wife Altje, who moved from Monmouth County to Middlebush in 1723 and proceeded to boost Somerset's population by 17 young Van Dorens—12 boys and five girls. The young Van Dorens carried on, bearing 129 children among them, and when Mrs. Van

Doren died at the age of 95 she left 352 descendants!

ANOTHER remarkable Somerset County family started soon after Rev. Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen came to Three Mile Run near New Brunswick to establish the Dutch Reformed Church in Somerset County in 1719. His duties extended over 300 square miles, as far away as the church "op der Millstone."

The congregations of the Raritan Valley invited Mr. Frelinghuysen's second son, John, to become their pastor after the death of Rev. Theodorus. John returned in 1750 from Holland, where he had been to obtain from the classis of Amsterdam a license to preach. He brought with him a young



The Old Dutch Parsonage, Somerville, erected in 1751 by the Rev. John Frelinghuysen, was the birthplace of Rutgers University.

This is the eighteenth of a series of articles dealing with New Jersey's 21 counties, sketching their past and present with now and then, a peek into their future. The counties will be considered in alphabetical order each week. Next Sunday: Sussex County.



The County Court House in Somerville, Hall-Mills trial scene. Earlier building in Millstone was burned by the British in 1779.

bride, Dinah Van Bergh, and in 1751 the young Frelinghuysens built a home of bricks imported from Holland.

John was the only one of Theodorus Frelinghuysen's five sons who left descendants, with the Frelinghuysen name being continued by John's illustrious only son Frederick — teacher, lawyer, patriot and statesman. Frederick's three sons, in turn, became lawyers, with son Theodore becoming a United States senator, Vice Presidential nominee on the 1844 Whig ticket and president of Rutgers University in 1850.

Young John Frelinghuysen died in 1754 after only four years in the ministry, but before his death he gathered about him in the Dutch parsonage four ministerial students in the first semi-

nary of the Dutch Reformed Church in America—which may properly be regarded as the birthplace of Rutgers University (chartered as Queen's College in 1766 to train Dutch Reformed ministers). New Brunswick Theological Seminary also traces its roots back to the old Dutch parsonage. After John Frelinghuysen's death his widow married one of his students, Jacob Rutzen Hardenbergh, who became the first president of Queen's College. The Frelinghuysen influence at Queen's was even more intimate, since John's son Frederick became the first tutor.

AS Somerset moved toward the Revolution the county grew slowly. Millstone assumed enough prominence in 1738 to be named county seat after



The 400-year-old oak in Basking Ridge. In 1924, tree experts used three tons of concrete to fill cavities in trunk and limbs.

the old court house burned at Six Mile Run. Basking Ridge attracted settlers to the 3,000-acre tract John Harrison bought in 1717, and in 1751 Rev. Dr. Samuel Kennedy started his famous academy in that village.

Grand estates became an established part of the Somerset scene before the war, with an outstanding early example being Lord Neil Campbell's lavish 1,600-acre estate at the junction of the North and South branches of the Raritan. None of the early estates, however, rivaled that of Lord Stirling (William Alexander), who in about 1760 returned to the 700-acre family holdings at Basking Ridge, intent on "settling a good farm in the wilderness." Lord Stirling lived in the grand manner "and altogether affected a style

and splendor probably unequalled in the colonies."

THE Revolution touched Somerset first at Basking Ridge, where the recalcitrant Gen. Charles Lee was captured in Mrs. White's Tavern on the morning of December 12, 1776. Thirty British dragoons surrounded the house and took the crestfallen Lee off to New Brunswick in his nightshirt. Lee returned to American lines in a prisoner exchange (and earned a blemished page in history for his dilatory tactics at the Battle of Monmouth in 1778).

Brighter pages remained in the war ledger for Somerset, starting after the Battle of Princeton in early Jan-

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Picturesque falls and old mill in Raritan Borough is reminder of period when villagers sought to harness the power of the "Queen of Rivers."

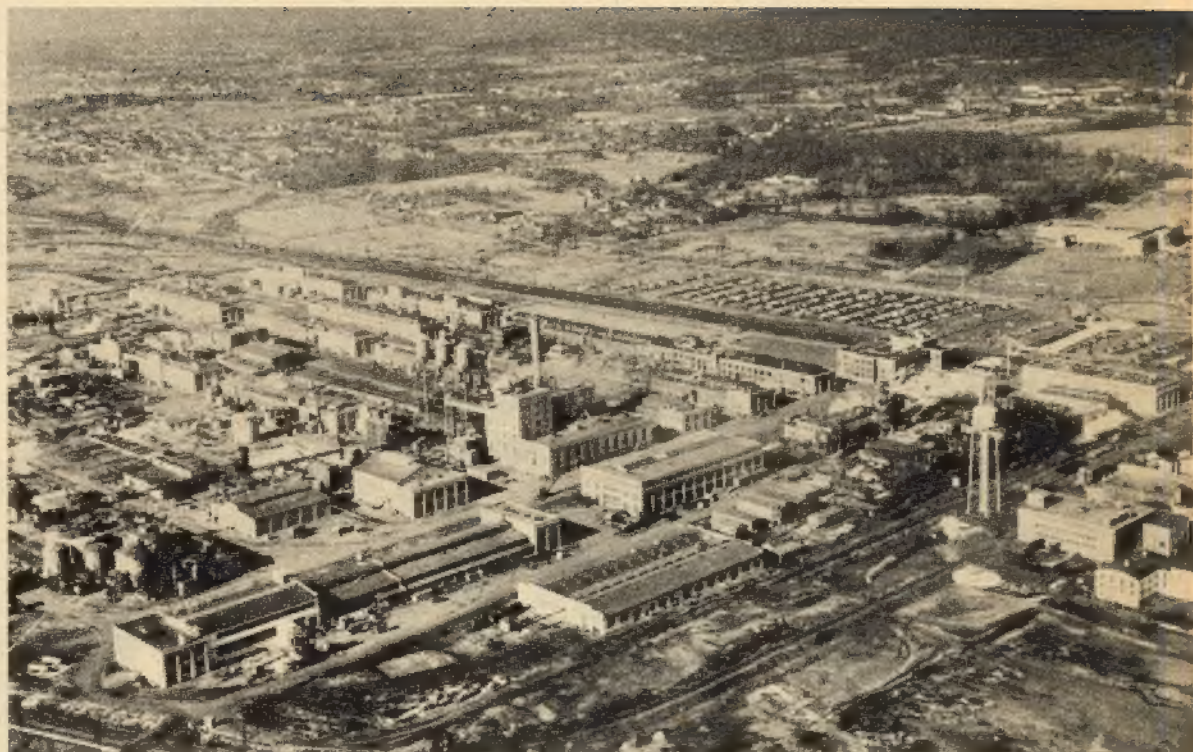
SOMERSET COUNTY



The Wallace House in Somerville, Washington's Winter headquarters in 1779-1780, and (below) the Van Veghten home in Finderne where the General and a Belle of the Ball did a dance marathon.



Site of Washington's camp in Middlebrook, north of Bound Brook, where Betsy Ross's first 13-star flag is believed to have flown.



The Calco plant in Bound Brook, one of Somerset's industries.

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uary, 1777, when Gen. Washington led his revived troops up the Millstone Valley and on to Winter quarters in Morristown. The following May and June his troops took positions on the Watchung Mountains, overlooking the plains where Gen. Howe tried in vain to coax the Continentals into battle.

Nearby at Camp Middlebrook, tradition says the first Betsy Ross flag flew after adoption of the 13-star flag on June 14, 1777. Those who say the flag flew there point out that Washington stayed near Middlebrook before and after June 14—and where but at the Commander-in-Chief's quarters would the first American flag have flown?

The Americans returned for the Winter of 1778-79, when Washington stayed at the Wallace House in Raritan (now Somerville). Relaxation marked that Winter. Washington enjoyed a Christmas party at Gen. Nathaniel Green's headquarters in the Van Veghten house in Finderne in 1778, when he "evinced his esteem for Mrs. Greene by dancing three hours with her without sitting down."

Even greater gaiety marked the party given by Gen. Henry Knox at Pluckemin on February 18, 1779, to celebrate the first anniversary of the French Alliance. Reviews and fireworks enthralled army men and their visitors and that night between 300 and 400 gentlemen danced until dawn with 70 of Somerset's handsomest maidens.

A TINY house in Griggstown didn't share the joy, because there dwelled young Mary Honeyman and her family, left alone much of the time by husband John. Mary's neighbors despised John as a Tory and she feared for his life, keeping locked in her Irish heart the knowledge that John Honeyman was in truth an American spy. War's end brought Honeyman the fame he deserved, particularly after Somerset County learned that John's reports paved the way for the tide-turning Battle of Trenton in 1776.

The valley of the Millstone felt the swiftly moving feet of British Col. John Graves Simcoe and his Queen's Rangers on October 27, 1779, when the British leader led his Rangers out of New Brunswick to Somerville and back on the road to New Brunswick in a

brilliant 55-hour dash in the course of a night and a morning. The Rangers coolly drew supplies from an American quartermaster, burned the court house in Millstone and pillaged the countryside as they went, striking terror in the valley. Pursuers captured Simcoe at Middlebush, but many military authorities nevertheless called his raid the most daring single episode of the war.

Gen. Washington came back to Somerset County once more, to write his Farewell Address while he stayed at the Berrien mansion at Rocky Hill from August to November, 1783. Nearby in Princeton the Continental Congress sat to draft peace terms with Great Britain.

THE county decided to relocate its county seat after Simcoe burned the Millstone Court House. Raritan (Somerville) was selected in 1782. A general vote of freeholders meeting in Tunison's tavern accepted a proposition from the Dutch Consistory that county and church unite in building a combination court house-church. The court house was completed in 1783 and a year later the consistory withdrew, being reimbursed 228 pounds as its share of the court house-church cost. In 1798 a new court house and jail was built, "similar to that at Flemington."

Life soon centered in Somerville (as it became known in 1809), both because of county business and because the village straddled both the Old York road (Elizabethtown to Philadelphia) and the New Jersey Turnpike (Easton to New Brunswick). Drivers of grain-laden wagons stopped overnight at Mrs. Fritts's tavern in Somerville, then left at dawn for New Brunswick. Many of the wagons trundled back into town bulging with supplies for Somerville merchants.

Attempts to harness the power of the Raritan River moved from the grist-mill stage to a broader utilization in 1819, when a dam was built across the river just below the junction of the North and South branches. Water from the dam powered industry more or less effectively for decades, but the force of Raritan River freshets and the even stronger force of continued law suits eventually ruined the industrial scheme.



Duke Park, Doris Duke's estate, was started by tobacco tycoon.

Up in the Somerset Hills Lord Stirling's estate fell into ruins, with chickens roosting on the gilded coats-of-arms and pigs rooting in the courtyard. Nearby Basking Ridge knew both prosperity and intellectual reputation, however—the latter for an academy opened in 1799 by Rev. Robert Finley, whose students included Samuel Lewis Southard and William L. Dayton, who both went on to distinguished careers in the United States Senate.

SOMERVILLE'S position as the center of county trade declined after 1834, when the Delaware & Raritan Canal was built through the county in the Millstone and Raritan valleys. The county economy shifted to towns along the canal, particularly Bound Brook. That sleepy little town, with fewer than 500 inhabitants, quickly became an important point on the cross-state waterway (where upwards of 2,000,000 tons of freight passed annually from 1860 to 1880).

Some of the good old trading days loomed for Somerville in 1842, when the Jersey Central Railroad came into town, but the same year the railroad rolled onward to Easton, dooming the sizable grain-wagon business. Eventually, of course, Somerville regained its importance as a local farm center because of the railroad connection.

Somerset County underwent important surgery in 1838 and 1850. On the first occasion the Legislature added to Mercer County a slice of Somerset which included land along all the north side of Princeton's main street (across from the college buildings). The 1850 cut took away from Somerset and added to Middlesex the triangle in Franklin Township where Rutgers College was located. Thus, within a dozen years, Somerset lost its "college towns."

Transportation advances marked the 1870s when the Lehigh Valley Railroad built its line across the center of Somerset and the Delaware & Bound Brook Railroad laid its track to link Bound Brook with the South and West. Both railroads, plus the Jersey Central, came into juxtaposition near Bound Brook, intensifying that town's vitality as a transportation axis.

Somerset County didn't have a town of more than 3,000 population

until 1880, when Somerville had just 3,100 residents, and its total population in 1885 was only slightly more than 27,000. One of its residents might well have been counted as two—Col. Ruth Goshen of Middlebush, Barnum's Circus giant whose seven-foot nine-inch stature made him the world's tallest man. His death in February, 1889, attracted thousands to gape at the largest single grave ever dug in New Jersey.

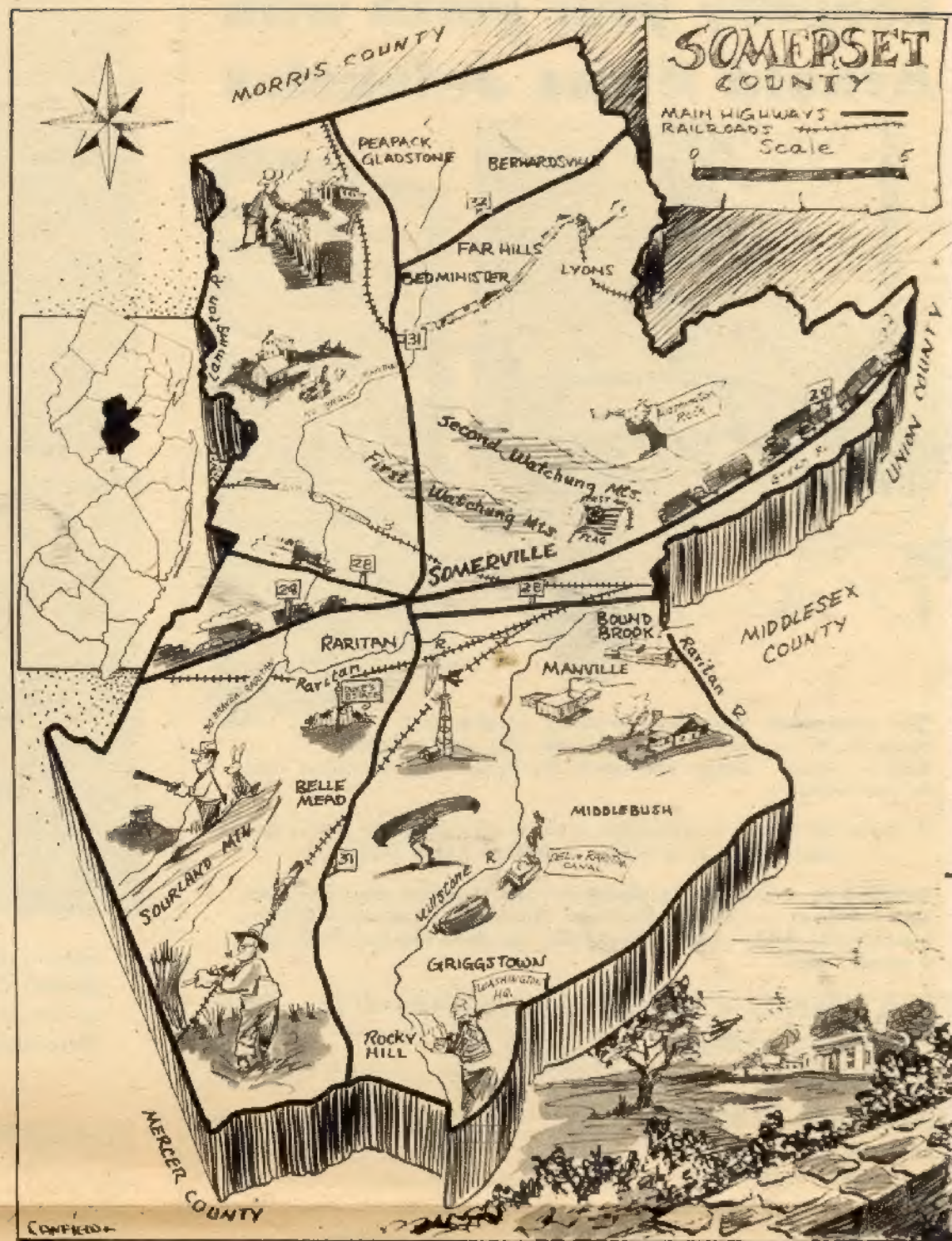
Improved railroad facilities in the 1880s and 1890s made Somerset more popular than ever with the wealthy, who now could live in the lush hills and commute to their work. Somerset County provided an ideal spot for those seeking large pieces of ground, since from the earliest days landholders were estate-minded. So, wealthy industrialists, stock brokers and financiers moved into the quietude of the mountains.

They bought 200, 500, even 1,000 acres, but none matched the imagination (or the bankroll) of James Buchanan Duke, tobacco tycoon who scorned the hills when he came out to buy land in 1893. Starting with the 400-acre Veghte farm on the banks of the Raritan, he assembled more than 2,200 acres by the turn of the century.

Then, as one writer put it, "he waved his magic wand, the check book" and wondrous things took place on the flat plains. Men and machines built hills, transplanted full-grown forests, made lakes appear where open fields had been before. Hundreds of thousands of rhododendrons and other shrubs brought the atmosphere of woodland to the fabulous estate. Duke spent an estimated \$15,000,000 to remake his flat open farmland into hilly forestland.

DUKE'S pride in his estate prompted him to open his lands to visitors, but one day in 1915 a party in 180 cars pulled into Duke Park and picknicked on the front lawn of his mansion. Duke threatened to close the park and made good his threat in 1917 when a motorist promised to thrash him if Duke didn't get his phaeton and team of horses off a park road so automobilists could get through.

An obscure institution in North Carolina, Trinity College, faced a problem in 1924 when Duke signed papers



Location of Somerset County makes it the hub of North Jersey.

at Duke Park for a \$46,000,000 trust fund for charitable and educational institutions. Of the total, \$6,000,000 was for Trinity—if it would change its name to Duke University. Trinity didn't hesitate. Duke died the following year, with the bulk of his \$100,000,000 estate placed in trust for his daughter Doris, who became the world's richest girl on her 21st birthday in 1933.

The early 1900s gave to the song-and-dance world two Somerset County girls. First, young Ruth Dennis, a native of Newark, made her way from a nearby farm in 1900 to dance on the stage of the old Somerset Hall and leaped from there to world-wide fame as Ruth St. Denis. At about the same time Anna Case, daughter of a South Branch blacksmith, impressed churchgoers with her voice in the Flemington village choir. Eventually Anna Case found her way to the Metropolitan Opera House and a great-concert career.

SOMERSET'S pride in its noted daughters couldn't hide its shame for its decaying old court house, so run-down that it brought only \$125 when sold at public auction in 1906. Removal of the 107-year-old building made way for a new \$300,000 white marble court house, dedicated in 1909 (and still in use). It was here that Mrs. Edward W. Hall and two of her brothers were acquitted after they faced trial for the murder in 1922 of Rev.

Edward W. Hall, rector of a New Brunswick church, and Mrs. Eleanor Mills, a choir singer.

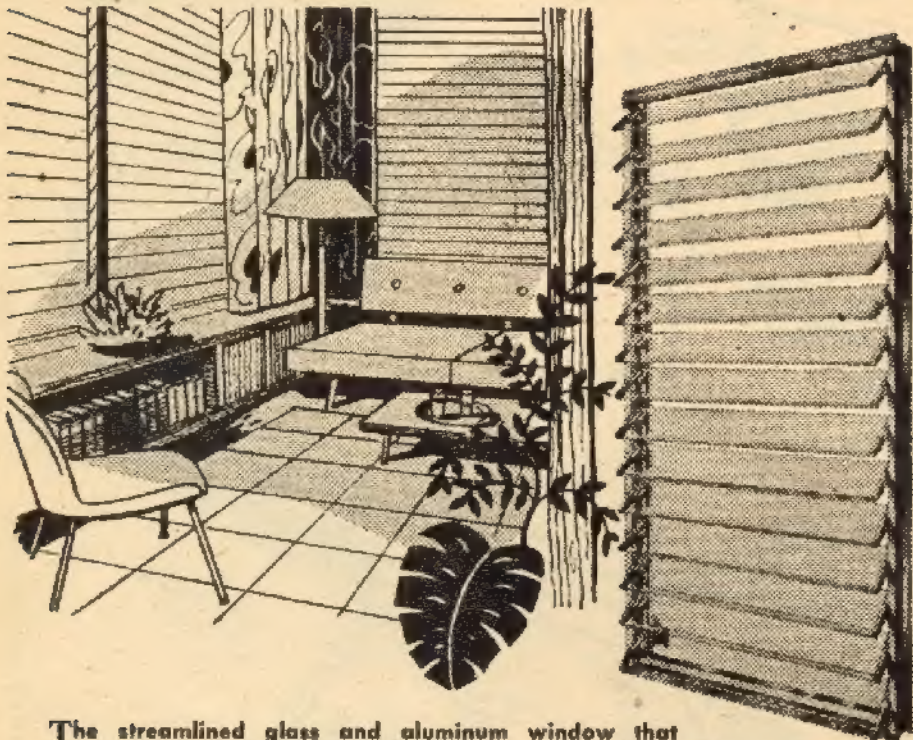
Fewer than 35,000 people lived in the county when the new court house was dedicated, most of them earning their livings from surrounding farms. However, just before World War I the excellent railroad facilities at Bound Brook at last attracted sizable industry to Somerset. In 1912 the Johns-Manville Co. built the biggest asbestos plant in the world in the flats southwest of Bound Brook (where the town of Manville has since grown up). Three years later Calco Chemical Co. started making dyes in Bound Brook for Somerville's Cott-a-Lap Co., a manufacturer of floor covering.

Somerset County had intimate knowledge of the end of World War I, because on July 2, 1921, President Warren G. Harding sat down at a desk in the home of U. S. Senator Joseph S. Frelinghuysen in Raritan and signed the Knox-Porter resolution proclaiming peace between the United States and the Central Powers. Harding had come to the Frelinghuysen estate for a Fourth of July week-end of golf and relaxation.

AS Somerset moved through 20th Century transition it took measures to preserve its past. Frelinghuysen descendants stepped forward in 1907 after the Central Railroad purchased the old home of Rev. John Freling-

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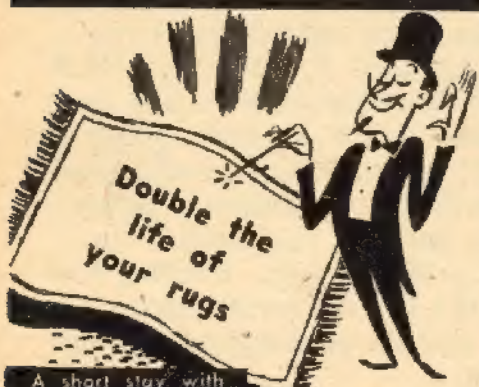
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Bound Brook, looking west from point over Route 2 bridge (left foreground) leading to South Bound Brook. BELOW: Old Dutch Reformed Church at Neshanic crossroads.

SOMERSET COUNTY

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huysen and planned to demolish it for a right-of-way. The Frelinghuysens bought the house and moved it 1,500 feet, and so well built was the old Dutch parsonage that not a crack was caused by the moving.

In Basking Ridge members of the Presbyterian Church heard the alarming news in 1924 that their 400-year-old oak tree faced rapidly increasing decay. Experts filled in 72 cavities with three tons of concrete and stretched 1,150 feet of cable through the tree to hold up the ponderous limbs of Somerset's most noted natural spectacle.

INDUSTRY surged forward in the 1920s and 1930s after highway building programs caused three major roads to meet near Somerville. Since World War II Somerset has become one of the fastest-growing industrial counties in the state, with new industry centering in the Somerville-Bound Brook-Manville area. Industrial employment in 1951 was up 250 per cent over 1940.

Population is bounding upward and has moved over the 100,000 mark—an increase of more than 35 per cent over 1940. Tangible evidence of the county's new administrative responsibilities as a result of its growth is the \$1,600,000 Somerset County Administration Building dedicated last Fall.

Nevertheless, estates and farms still are the mark of Somerset, with its 1,100 farms yielding products valued at \$7,500,000 annually. The Somerset Hills continue to harbor the very wealthy while the towns and villages in the valleys reflect the prosperity to be found in the rich soil.

Today, 300 years after the first Dutch traveler saw the Raritan Valley, Somerset is still "handsome and pleasant to behold."

